

Quality First

I. INTENT OF STRATEGY

The Quality First initiative is a comprehensive approach of collaborative services that supports early care and education programs to achieve and sustain high quality best practices for young children birth to age five. The approach includes program assessment, on-site coaching, financial incentives, consultants specializing in health and safety practices, and opportunities for professional development for participants and technical assistance professionals. The expected result of this initiative is to expand the number of programs offering access to high quality care and education throughout the state of Arizona. These high quality programs will have environments and learning materials that are developmentally appropriate, a curriculum and child assessment protocol focused on child development and early literacy, and staff with the educational qualifications to work with infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

DESCRIPTION OF SIGNIFICANCE

High quality early care and education programs, serving children birth to age five, are those that staff classrooms with educated and experienced individuals who understand the developmental needs of infants, toddlers and preschoolers. The classroom staffs create and sustain learning environments that nurture the emotional, social, language and cognitive development of all children, and they support positive, consistent relationships that provide young children with the individual attention they need to learn and grow. High quality early care and education programs also have well-established administrative practices that support staff development, child development, and family interaction. These programs have high standards of health and safety practices that are implemented consistently. The Quality First initiative is a system of supports that functions as a guide and resource for program implementation of high quality.

Quality First, Arizona's voluntary quality improvement and rating system, is designed to improve the quality of early care and education so that young children can begin school safe, healthy and ready to succeed. Quality First does not duplicate or replace, but builds upon state licensing and certification regulations, addressing multiple aspects of early care and education through research-based indicators of quality.

Quality First participation is open to all early care and education programs in the state of Arizona serving children birth to age five that are regulated and in good standing with Arizona Department of Health Services (ADHS), Department of Economic Security (DES), and/or Tribal Authority or Military Government. Programs are selected for enrollment on a regular basis throughout each fiscal year based on the number of slots each First Things First region has funded. As participation in Quality First is voluntary, programs may continue through multiple years as funding is available and their quality improvement efforts continue successfully.

The role of Quality First is to identify quality standards, offer consistent, reliable and ongoing measurement of quality standards, and provide supports to achieve those quality standards. Quality First participants have access to a comprehensive set of services throughout their participation, including on-site coaching, program assessment, financial incentives, and child care health consultation. The availability of services is based on each program's size, quality rating level, and participation type. Through this collaboration of services, Quality First participants will receive comprehensive supports in raising the overall quality of early care and education among regulated program types within Arizona.

Smith, et. al. describes Quality Rating Improvement Systems as offering a potentially strong mechanism for improving the quality of early childhood settings in ways that can benefit young children's well-being and long-term school success (Smith, S., Schneider, W., Kreader, J.L. 2010 p. 4). Quality Rating Systems are also utilized as a primary means of informing families, regulators and policy makers about quality standards for early care and education programs.

Across the nation, most other state systems are considered Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) as the participants are rated prior to improvement efforts being offered. Arizona has chosen to provide improvement supports prior to establishing a participant's rating in order to allow for learning and the implementation of best practices before the quality rating is established. Although more data is needed before causal statements can be made about the role of a Quality Improvement and Rating System (QIRS) such as Quality First, the national trend toward building such systems grew out of research findings demonstrating that significant, positive links have been documented between certain aspects of quality care and children's outcomes (Mitchell, A.W. 2005).

Early Childhood Scholarships Timeline

State Fiscal Year 2009 (SFY) – First year of regional funding plan and strategy implementation. FTF Board approved temporary Emergency Child Care Scholarships in March, 2009 to begin implementation April 1, 2009 to be funded through formula-based Discretionary funds. Pima South was allocated \$946,330 for 463 scholarships. Pima South funded an additional \$16,394 for a total of \$977,135.

SFY2010 – Emergency Scholarships funds allocated in SFY2009 were not fully expended and were rolled into SFY2010.

SFY2011 – Emergency Scholarships no longer mandated by Board. Emergency Scholarship strategy transitioned to Child Care Scholarships. In fall of 2010, Board gave regions guidance to spend down carry forward funds. Pima South funded Childcare Scholarships at \$250,000 for remaining 6 month period of SFY2010 using carry forward funds.

SFY2012 –Pima South funded \$500,000 for scholarships basically continuing same commitment as SFY2011 but for 12 months. Pima South also funded Early Childhood Expansion which included funding for scholarships for Ajo Preschool.

SFY2013 – Child Care Scholarships transitioned to Quality First Childcare Scholarships and were linked to Quality First model with base level funding for programs participating in Quality First. Pima South allotted approximately \$1.7 million. Expansion scholarships transitioned to Pre K Scholarships funded at \$480,000 for Ajo, Altar Valley and Amado zip codes. All star levels, including early childhood education programs on the Quality First waitlist, were eligible for scholarships with plan for phasing lower levels out by SFY2016.

SFY2014 – Quality First Childcare Scholarships at approximately \$2.2 million as part of Quality First model; Pre K Scholarships at approximately \$520,000 for Ajo, Altar Valley, Amado and Arivaca zip codes. Quality First wait list programs no longer eligible for Quality First Scholarships.

SFY2015 – All scholarships tied to Quality First as part of Quality First model (no more Pre K scholarships) but regions can specify age bands and target zip codes. Total scholarship funding was approximately \$2.3 million. 1 Star programs no longer eligible for scholarships

SFY2016 – Board approved policy change to reset regional budgets to focus on sustainability. Pima South allocation was reduced by approximately \$3.1 million. Board approved recommendation to no longer require that regions fund Quality First Scholarships as a part of Quality First participation; regions could decide whether to fund scholarships. Only 3-5 star rated programs eligible for QF scholarships. 1-2 Star programs no longer are eligible for scholarships. Pima South funding \$672,543 for 90 scholarships slots in 3-5 star Quality First programs in five targeted rural zip codes.